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Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth

● Hortense Cupo

THE leather on the front seat of the car seemed to suck into itself the blue gabardine of Anne's slacks, and she moved over closer to the window in an effort to release herself from the uncomfortable sensation. She hated riding in cars unless she herself were driving, and it irritated her especially to watch the steady cautiousness with which David handled the wheel. Impatiently, she pressed one flat red sandal against the floor of the car as if to make it move more swiftly down the highway.

She turned her blond head to look down at Charlie and, as usual, the sight of her child made all the tenderness rush to the surface of her body and explode in warm, comforting ripples. His small form was thrust forward on the seat between David and herself, and his restless, inquisitive eyes scanned the road ahead and to the side with a curiously mature intentness. His mouth was open a little and she could just see the edges of his sharp baby teeth glinting over his lower lip, and he reminded her suddenly of a squirrel. Yesterday he had had his hair cut, and she wanted frantically to bend over and kiss the back of his neck where the hair fuzzed upward into the thick darkness on top. She would have if she hadn't been afraid of a childish rebuke from him in front of David.

She threw a quick, surreptitious glance over at her husband and she saw his straight, clean-cut profile etched against the window at his side. She smiled bitterly. When they were first married, David used to call her every day from the office just to hear the sound of her voice. Now it seemed incredible that they had ever been in love, and she recalled the feeling as if it were an old physical injury—something remote and no longer a part of herself.

Charlie fell back suddenly against the back of the seat, his small body tired from the strain of pushing forward, and she could smell the sharp, clean fragrance of the hair lotion which the barber had used. Almost too casually she dropped her arm over his shoulder, and when he didn't move, she pressed him lightly to her.

"Are you cool enough, darling? Or would you like to sit here next to the window?" she asked him, and the answer was an impatient, disinterested shake of his head.

There was silence for a time while Charlie's eyes stared dreamily at the bright red and gray orderliness of the dashboard; then he looked up at Anne, lifting his stiff brown lashes until they brushed his eyelids. "Mommy, what will you buy for me today?"

Delightedly, she smiled down at him, and with a complacent smile

looked over at David. "You just wait and see, darling. It will be something especially nice."

She always bought him some special little present when she went anywhere, and sometimes they would make a small game out of it. She would pretend that she had forgotten it, and then Charlie would jump on her lap and search diligently in her purse or under her pillow until he found it. Then he would squeal triumphantly and throw his thin arms around her neck, his sweet, warm breath blowing cozily in her ear. She was glad that this corner of their lives belonged to her and Charlie alone.

"But what will it be, Mommy? I want to know." Charlie's persistent voice broke through the web of her thoughts.

She gave his shoulder a little squeeze. "If I tell you, Daddy will know, and that will spoil everything."

There was a frown on David's face, and she knew that she had hurt him again. She laughed deep down in her throat, silently and exultantly, because she knew that he couldn't reach them here in this little sphere where they conspired together. He had his work to compensate for the failure of their marriage, but she had her love for Charlie—a love which was like a door shutting the insecurity outside. David's voice reached her. "Would you hand me my cigarettes from the compartment?"

Abruptly, she snapped open the compartment and removed the shiny redness of a pack of cigarettes and

handed them across to him. She watched as he awkwardly pulled out one of the cigarettes and lit it. Once she would have lit it for him, but now she took an almost sadistic pleasure in watching him do it himself. She wondered absently whether he took out other women and whether they lit his cigarettes for him. One of their first quarrels had started over a woman he had been too attentive to at a party, but since that time the quarrels had mounted and mounted until they were like an invisible hill of bitterness between them.

"Mommy, are we almost there?" Charlie's head leaned impatiently against her arm.

"It won't be long now, darling—although, I must say, your father is taking all his time."

She waited for the anger to wash over David, and she was satisfied when he said, "Do you want us all to be killed just so you can get there ten minutes earlier?"

She ignored him. "Charlie, do you remember what Mommy told you to look for today?"

The child's eyes lighted and his voice was proud. "A big white building with lots of trees and a riding stable on the other side of the street."

The pride swelled inside of her. "David, isn't it wonderful that Charlie has such a good memory? Mrs. Jefferson told me that he's one of the fastest readers in the first group. She says he has an excellent attention span."

"All kids have good memories, Anne," he answered abruptly. She

knew that he didn't like extravagant praise in Charlie's presence but she didn't care. There were times when she felt as if she alone were responsible for her son's existence. David was totally lacking in understanding of the boy.

When they arrived at the park, Charlie nudged her in his impatience to get out of the car. Sliding out, he jumped to the ground and ran off ahead of them, his short legs in their tan shorts leaping down the path. David's voice called after him, stern and parental.

"Charlie, come back and wait for us. You'll get lost if you run too far ahead."

"He'll be all right," Anne told him, sharpness edging her voice. "You're too strict with him." She was secretly pleased when Charlie came back to them, a stormy petulant look on his face. He was angry with David for spoiling his fun. She felt like bending down and kissing him, but she took him instead by the hand and they swung together down the walk, David trailing a little behind them.

They were near the lake now and they could see the red brick bridge arching prettily, like a woman's eyebrow, from one shore to the other. Charlie screeched loudly when he saw it. "Let's go out in the boat—please."

"Sure thing, son. Maybe I can hire a couple of fishing lines and some bait so we can fish awhile."

"Boy, Oh Boy!" Charlie jumped up and down eagerly, and Anne thought bitterly of the time on their honeymoon when David had gone

ten miles out of his way just to buy her a piece of china she had admired.

In five minutes, David was back with the fishing lines and bait, and he held the boat carefully while they stepped in. As they pulled away, she watched the strong, muscular movement of David's arms under his sport shirt as he rowed expertly down the lake, and even more intently she watched her son looking at David. Her imagination pictured him admiring his father's skill, and she called out loudly.

"Charlie, you'd better sit back here next to me. You might get splashed up there."

"I won't get splashed. I want to sit here." His voice was a mixture of scorn and stubbornness.

"It's more comfortable back here on the pillow," she coaxed in desperation.

"I'm all right, Mom." Charlie's tone was dangerously close to that annoyance which she knew so well.

She felt defeated. When Charlie used that tone with her, she felt as if a knife were twisting in her breast. Distractedly, she picked at the green flecks of paint which were peeling off the edge of the boat. Somehow, the childish rebuke made her hate David even more—as if he were responsible for Charlie's curtness. She wondered suspiciously if David tried to turn her child against her when they were alone together.

Leaning over the side of the boat, Charlie called excitedly. "Mom, look at the fish down there. See them! See them!"

She was slightly pacified by his

attention to her. "Why yes, darling. They're very pretty, aren't they?"

They were pulling in closer to the other shore now, and they could see the lacy reflection of the willow trees swaying about lazily in the green water. Out in the middle of the lake the sun burned a bright gold spot in the clearness. David stopped rowing and lifted the oars into the boat.

"I think this is a pretty good spot."

David handed his son the smaller of the two lines and helped him to bait it. He showed him how to hold it in the water, and then he threw his own line out skillfully into the lake. There was no talking for a long time, the rustle of the breeze in the willows and the faint slap of the water against the sides of the boat the only sounds near them. Every now and then, the quicksilver sparkle of a fish flashed through the water and Charlie would suppress an excited squeal.

Suddenly, she started as she saw David pull in his line. A small, spiny object wiggled for a moment in the air and then dropped to the bottom of the boat, where it flapped about in struggle. She pulled her feet away from the small, ugly fish.

Charlie bent over to touch the fish wonderingly with his fingers. "Daddy, can I have it? Can I have it?" There was a tremble in his voice.

David smiled at him calmly and bent to loosen the hook from the fish's mouth. "It's only a baby, Charlie. We'll throw it back in so it can grow into a big whopper."

"But I want it. I don't want to throw it back in." His mouth clamped together obstinately. He turned to Anne. "Mommy, I want the fish. Make him give it to me."

She was smug with elation. "David, give it to him. After all, he's only a child."

David's brows met in a dark, troubled line, and she knew that he was angry again. "It isn't that I don't want him to have it, Anne. But there's a law about young fish." The muscles in his jaw were moving agitatedly. "Besides, you know it's not good for him to have everything he wants."

She looked at him archly. "Since when have you ever given him anything he really wants?"

"That's not fair, Anne."

Her laughter was short and brittle. "You're a fine one to be talking about fairness."

He threw his cigarette into the water and it made a faint sputtering sound before it died. "I don't want to discuss it any further."

She brushed the loose tendrils of hair back from her forehead and turned to Charlie. "Don't worry, honey. If Daddy won't let you have the old fish, we'll stop in the pet shop on the way home and buy you some."

Without a word, David dropped the small fish into the bottom of the boat and reached for the oars. Swiftly, he rowed down the lake, past the picnic area where the cries of the children pierced the air, past the rows of green benches where the mothers sat with their baby carriages like still statues. When he

was half-way to the dock, he spoke. "I don't think it's a good day for fishing. The sun's too hot."

It was just like David to end their quarrel with polite words about the weather. Charlie had stopped his weeping now and was holding the discarded fish tightly in his fist, but it no longer struggled for life. She was glad this had happened, for now Charlie would know who really loved him. She thought she could detect the childish hatred with which he looked at David from time to time.

When they reached the shore, the three of them climbed out—David first with the fishing lines, and Anne holding tightly to Charlie's hand. As they walked down the path leading from the boathouse, Charlie broke away from her grasp and began to run, his small body tumbling forward without coordination. Anne saw, with horror, his small bony knees buckling under him and his head hitting the dirt. She shrieked and ran toward him, her sandals furiously disturbing the dry earth, and out of the corner of her eye she could see David running too.

Simultaneously they arrived at Charlie's side and together they bent over him. He was weeping angrily and rubbing a small red

lump over his left eye. Anne tried to pull him against her, but she could feel his palms pushing her away with wild impatience. Short, muffled sobs shook his thin voice now as he pulled away from her.

"Daddy, Daddy, hold me."

She sat back unbelievably on her heels in the grass, and for a moment a numb dizziness covered her. He was calling David and not her. She bent toward him again, certain that she had not heard clearly. She tried to snatch him to her, but David was reaching over and swooping him effortlessly into his big arms. Then he began to walk over toward the car.

"You're all right, Son. Just stop crying and I'll make the lump go away." He had spoken to her in that same tone when they had first been married, she recalled with a sick feeling.

Charlie's sobs were softer now, and the tears lightly twinkled on his stiff eyelashes like raindrops, and shone in small wet pools on his cheeks. Tightly his thin arms hung around David's neck. At the toe of her red sandal, the dead fish lay, forgotten. She got up from the grass and walked over to the car, the knife twisting savagely in her breast.



A Voice of Dust, of One Beloved

• Howard A. Wiley

Here already?
And no shouldered scythe
or faceless cowl
or trailing cloak of black?
Just this drenching pain
and blackening dread, eh?
And breath-throttling clutch
of unseen hands
upon my heart . . .
Thus I've waited.
Now
one agonizing wrench
and then—

No going back.
Never.
I know.

I know.
What a long long word:
never.
The other side
of
forever.
So . . .

But you annihilate in me
one better memory
than most men know.

She was . . . she was . . .
Ah well
even living tongues would stammer
to enunciate
that quiet incandescence
that bittersweetly fire
that . . .

Ah, were death as painful
as the muteness of a mind
that has been touched by her
and cannot sing as sweetly
as that touch—
were death as painful,
men would have found a way
to stay
your hand.

I grieve, fellow,
not for me,
but that what she was
dies unspoken
in this clay . . .

Open House

• Marion Schoeberlein

Now I must let spring and God come in.
All the doorbells ring with Him and love.
Flowers run their race with artistry.
I hurt from winter having stayed so long,
And my dreams have been igloosed in until
Now the pink and blue shell of springtime
Breaks around me . . . I hatch the egg . . .
My heart is at last an open house again!

Music, When Voices Die

● Hatton Burke

MRS. FERGUSON was sitting behind the desk in the lobby when I walked in. The place was otherwise empty, and the shabby overstuffed furniture gaped at me in the dim light. I blinked my eyes because I had been outside walking in the late afternoon sun.

"I got a new customer today," said Mrs. Ferguson. She sounded scornful, but I felt good and pretended not to notice.

"That's good," I said. "Is that who's making all that stir coming from upstairs?"

"No stir. Just talk."

"All right, talk. There's some music on somewhere, too, isn't there?"

"Of course not," she said. "What's wrong with you, Leon?"

"Nothing. I just hear some music. My hearing's supersonic."

"Don't flash your fancy words at me," she said.

"Or maybe it's just that I'm feeling so good today." I stopped and listened a minute. I could hear the sound of voices in what seemed to be anxious conversation, but running through it was music, too.

"Where's Lena?" I asked after a moment.

"She's upstairs and she's gonna stay up there," said Mrs. Ferguson. She looked at me strangely, a glint of malice in her eyes. I looked at

her eyes a moment. They were just little narrow slits, made smaller by puffs of fat.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Lena and I have a date to go to dinner and then to do some dancing."

"Lena ain't going," said Mrs. Ferguson. "Besides, how you gonna do any dancing with your game leg?" She still had that yellow malice in her eyes.

"The weather's clear," I explained. "It doesn't bother me so much in good weather. See." I walked up and down the length of the lobby, and I was careful to limp a little but not too much. I came back and stood in front of the counter.

"I always thought you was faking that game leg," she said. "I don't believe you got no wound in Korea."

"You're like everybody else." I spoke as angrily as I could. "We go and lie in mud, fight, kill, and are wounded. And what do we get? After a day at home it's all gone like a puff of smoke in high wind."

"I don't know," she replied calmly. After a moment she added, "I think the people of this town have been pretty good to you since you got back. You've got away with a whole lot more than an ordinary young fellow could have done."

"Good to me!" I kept up the scoffing, movie talk, "I haven't even

been able to get a job. Nobody understands me."

She looked at me a long time, and I could see she was getting madder and madder. I was glad I had made her mad. It made me feel better than ever. I was surprised she didn't explode with some angry language, but she just said, soft and mouse-like, "You're quite a killer with the girls, aren't you, Mr. Leon Tracy?" Her down-turned lips betrayed the scorn which didn't show in her voice.

"I have my points," I said, not without pride.

"Yes," she said. "My new customer's interested in your points."

I felt little animals turning somersault in my stomach. She opened up the book she used for a register, and with her finger pointing at the last name, she shoved the book across the counter so I could see it. I stared at the name:

Mrs. Leon Tracy

2201 Lauderdale

Louisville, Kentucky

"Lauderdale's a pretty name for a street."

"You ought to know," she said.

"Did Lena see this?"

"Of course Lena saw it. Do you think I want my daughter going around with a married man? Why, I oughta have you arrested, leading my poor Lena on the way you have."

"There must be some mistake," I stammered.

"Mistake!" she said. "You was stationed up there for about a year before they sent you over, wasn't you?"

"Yes, sure, but there's lots of

people stationed . . ."

"Tell it to the sheriff. He's upstairs," she added. "This one means business. She ain't a whiner like my Lena."

"Lena and me's supposed to go out," I said. "I can dance all right when the weather's clear."

"Take your wife," she said sarcastically. "I'll just go up and tell her you're here. Her and the sheriff." She looked like a little boy who had just won all the marbles. She struggled up out of her chair and started toward the stairway.

"Wait a minute," I said. The music was in my ears again. It settled down to a sharp high note sounded on a scratchy violin, and it kept on and on. "I'll go up myself and save you the bother." Mrs. Ferguson just grunted and sat down again. I was so excited I almost forgot to limp when I walked up the steps.

At the top of the stairway I could hear the conversation plainer. The door to the sun parlor was almost closed, muting the sound. As I walked down the carpeted hallway, I could hear Margaret's voice all right, but she wasn't saying much—just sandwiching in a "yes" and "no" like punctuation here and there. The sheriff was doing most of the talking. I felt as if I had my hand on the volume button of a radio, because each step I took made the voices louder. Fragments of what Mr. Thompson was saying came in spurts between the music, ". . . lots of scrapes . . . once . . . the man wasn't hurt much . . . of course there was the money, and

that gets serious . . . but we managed to smooth it over. His leg, you know."

Then Margaret, in a soft voice, "I don't know anything about it. All I got was a letter from the army saying he was in the hospital, and later a letter saying he had been discharged. I haven't heard from him in more than six months."

Mr. Thompson said something I couldn't get, then louder, "We didn't like to be too hard on him. Rehabilitation and all that, you know. But I thought . . ."

He cut off short as I pushed open the door and limped in. I didn't look directly at Margaret, but I could see her anyway, looking small and frightened in the big chair.

"What's all the ruckus?" I asked Mr. Thompson.

"No ruckus, son," he said in a smooth voice that sounded silvery like his hair and calmly gray like his eyes. "Don't you know this young lady, Leon?"

I turned to Margaret. Her face was white and her eyes troubled, but she still had that outdoor freshness about her, with her slightly rumped, short brown hair. She was prettier than ever.

"Don't you even recognize me, Leon?" she asked in a voice that was weak and strong at the same time.

"Sure," I said to the sheriff. "It's my wife, Margaret. Hello, Margaret."

Mr. Thompson seemed ruffled. "Here, look at these pictures she's been showing me," he said. I looked. They were the pictures taken

at our wedding.

"Am I supposed to turn hand-springs?" I asked. "And why don't you turn off that damned radio?" I walked over to the radio on the table by the window, reached down and tried to turn the control button to the left, but it wouldn't budge. I went back and stood in front of Margaret's chair. Her eyes were cloudy, doubtful.

"Hello, Margaret," I said. I reached down and took her hand and pulled her up. She was soft and kittenish, but a little frightened and jumpy too. She looked up at me appealingly. Suddenly I took her into my arms and kissed her. I felt her struggle a little at first, then her arms were around my neck, one hand running gently through my hair. I felt as if I couldn't hold her close enough.

"Leon, Leon," she whispered finally, and her voice was little and choking. She looked like a frightened wren. I let her go, and she sat down again.

"Was that better, sheriff?" I asked, smiling.

"You haven't written," said Margaret, her voice stronger but still trembling. "I didn't know. Your leg . . . why didn't you let me know?"

"Listen at that, sheriff," I said. "Just like a wife to start nagging."

"Maybe I'll leave you two alone for awhile," said the sheriff, getting up. "I'll be downstairs in the lobby."

When he was gone, Margaret turned her big innocent eyes toward me.

"Leon, I've been worried sick."

"Forget it," I said. "Life's too short. I didn't want to come back and be a bother to you. Combat's no joke, and a bad wound even less so." It sounded pretty good to me.

"But you're my husband. You should have told me. The doctor just said you were hospitalized; he didn't say you were wounded."

"Let's not get gloomy," I said. "Tell you what. Let's go out and get something to eat and then we can talk."

I could see she was reluctant. She fidgeted a bit and then said faintly, "Well . . . all right. Is there a place nearby?"

"Couple of blocks. Soft lights, good food. And we can have a drink there too."

She got out her compact and began to powder her face and straighten her hair.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked. "I mean, can you walk that far?"

"Oh, sure. My leg's lots better. It was a nasty wound, but it doesn't bother me very much in clear weather."

When we started down the steps, I could hear Mrs. Ferguson and Mr. Thompson talking in the lobby, but they stopped when they heard us. They both looked up at us as we came down, both with very solemn faces.

"We're going out to eat," I said. "Somewhere we can have a private talk."

"That's fine," said Mr. Thompson. "I'll come back over after supper in case you want to talk to me any more, Mrs. Tracy."

"Thank you," said Margaret. "You've been very kind." She looked like a small hurt animal which had been caught in a trap and couldn't get out.

"You can tell Lena," I whispered to Mrs. Ferguson. She just shot a malignant glance at me without saying anything.

Outside, the sun had gone down and it was almost dark.

"This time of day is a bastard," I said, sighing.

"What?" she said, surprised and uncertain.

"A bastard," I repeated. "Not day and not night. Just first-dark and illegitimate."

"Oh," she said. She forced a little mirthless laugh. She seemed shocked, and I figured she needed softening up with a little fine talk, so I said, "You know—that part of the day when a mysterious glow falls over everything and the world stands still, hanging suspended between a something and a nothing."

"Yes, yes," she said hurriedly, as if she wanted to stop me. "It's beautiful."

I took her arm as we walked along the deserted street. I could sense the alert tenseness of her small body. She had an assurance and determination in her step which didn't show much anywhere else.

People in the restaurant stared at us. They knew me but had never seen her before. I felt proud because Margaret was so good looking. We found a corner booth where the light was not so bright. I conferred with the waiter, and he went away. Soon he returned with two drinks, and we

ordered food.

As we drank, Margaret spread her hands out on the table and said, "All right, now. Let's get down to business." Her voice was strong and determined, as if the drink had given her courage.

"First," I said, "I want to know why you called the sheriff."

"Well, it seemed the logical thing to do. I know nobody here, and the sheriff in a small town knows everybody."

"You didn't intend to have me arrested?"

"Of course not. Should I?" She sat still for a moment; then with a worried shrug and slightly outstretched hands she said, simply, "Why, Leon?"

"This is a nice little town. Life is easy, and I'm almost anonymous."

"But you can't do that."

"I've done it. Because you see it's not the same. It won't ever be the same again."

"Have you forgotten all about us?" she asked wistfully.

"Yes, I have tried," I said.

"Then try to remember," she whispered.

"No," I said. "I had an illusion once a long time ago. Now it's gone, and any substitute for it would be cheap."

"You're talking in circles."

"No. The past can be poisonous and thoughts become sick." I liked the way the words seemed to be turning themselves on my tongue.

"Leon," she said urgently, "go back home with me. We could make out beautifully." I could see the tears starting in her eyes.

"And make tomorrow vault backward over a star to yesterday?" I said.

"What?"

"And make the strong man tame his feral soul?"

"No, that's not what you said. What is it, Leon? Is something wrong?" Her voice was perplexed, tremulous.

"No, Margaret. Forget it."

"Forget it? I can't possibly forget it."

"And the spider, laughing, weaves her web," I said.

"We're getting nowhere," she said with a tone of finality.

The waiter brought our food and we ate in silence. I noticed that Margaret was only nibbling.

After a little I began to laugh. It was first just a chuckle, but it got going and I couldn't get it stopped. It got pretty loud, so that people were looking at us.

"What on earth?" said Margaret.

"What's the matter, Leon?"

I choked it down a little and said, "Nothing. It's just sort of funny, all of this."

"Funny!" She was indignant. "It's anything but funny to me. You have a curious sense of humor."

"Oh, it's not only us," I said after I could control my voice. "It's just people in general. Haven't you ever noticed how they make so much fuss over so many little things?"

"Little things, indeed." Her voice was incredulous.

"Little ceremonies for everything," I said.

"Like marriage," she said.

"That is not what I meant at all." I spoke dramatically.

"Then, what . . .?"

"No, no. Absolutely no more questions," I said. "Let's have a little silence. It's the most beautiful of music."

We had the moment of silence, but her glare across the table shut out the comfort of it. After a bit, she pushed back her chair.

"I'm going," she said. "You can come or stay as you like." She picked up her purse and gloves with that tone of finality which only a peremptory woman with purse and gloves can have.

I paid the check and followed her out. We walked in silence. A hazy pall of moonlight hung over the empty street, and our footsteps in hollow cadence were like somber drumbeats in a vast white marble hall. I felt a thrill of terror at the patterns on the pavement of sharp sliced black and white; they undulated with our movements, reshaped themselves into the figures of wild animals. Suddenly the music flooded in upon me again, but now it was in the low high wail of a dirge.

I took Margaret's arm. She tried to draw away at first, but when I began to limp more emphatically and to whimper gently in her ear, she no longer protested. I slipped my arm around her waist and we walked all the way back without saying a word.

The light of the lobby as we entered was blinding. Mrs. Ferguson and Mr. Thompson were sitting in

the big chairs. I thought I heard footsteps dying away on the stairway.

"That would be Lena," I whispered to Margaret.

"Did you have a good talk?" asked Mr. Thompson pleasantly.

"Very nice," said Margaret. "But I'm rather tired. If you don't mind, I think I'll go upstairs."

"Of course. You must be very tired," said Mr. Thompson.

"You go right ahead, honey," added Mrs. Ferguson. "Can I get you anything?"

"No . . . No, thank you. Good night. And thank you again, Mr. Thompson."

"I'll walk upstairs with you," I said. She frowned, and I noticed that Mrs. Ferguson and the sheriff looked at one another in a strange way, but nobody said anything.

When we got to the top of the steps I took her hand.

"I don't think I'll go any farther, Margaret," I said. "I'm sorry it couldn't have been different." She looked at me long and tearfully, her hazel eyes clouded to a darker shade. We stood silently, looking into each other's eyes.

"Leon," she said at length, in a deep, husky whisper. Before I realized what either of us was doing, she was in my arms, and I was kissing her again. The music came back with the tenderness of her kisses—deep sweeping sounds of sweetness. "A melody," I thought fleetingly, "that's sweetly played in tune."

Finally she pushed me gently away, and I could see that she was

crying desperately. I stood with my hands resting on her shoulders. I lifted my hand and smoothed her hair, then touched her cheek lightly. It was damp, and the color had risen in her face until her cheeks were abnormally red. Her face was soft and pleading, and our eyes were deep in each other's. My mind was off to far tomorrows. I lifted a hand tentatively from her cheek, and suddenly I drew my arm back and struck her sharply across the face. She gasped in surprised horror, then began a low, crescendoing wail, as, with the other hand, I struck the other side of her face. Strength and anger surged through my body. It must have been only an instant later that something seemed to snap in me, and I heard her screaming, a high moaning terrified screech. I turned and ran down the stairs and out the front door. Mr. Thompson

was on his feet and moving as I sped through the lobby.

The sharp mist of moonlight hit my face with a sting and I ran with furious speed. My only thought was to escape. The street was still empty with a pale-moon, terrifying emptiness, and weird, leaping animal shadows played dangerously about my feet. I moved from side to side, trying to escape their protruding arms. I heard the beat of footsteps behind me, getting closer. I dodged and jumped, tried to gain speed. In an instant of inspiration, I dashed around a corner into the safety of splotchy blackness, but in terror I felt the headlong impact of cold stone, felt the stealthy, shadow-veiled arms encircling my body. I fell sprawling to the pavement as the rapid fire of drumbeats, echoing and re-echoing, grew loud and deafening in my ears.

The Alchemist's Kitchen

• Stephen Morris

Vapors choke breath, gagging the lung and heart's dream,
Lead en torpor leaching the broth and kettle.

Bang goes wonder! . . . strangling all the blackness.

Gold boils plume, bursting.

Morning Remembered

On the death of a friend's father

● **Brother D. Adelbert, F. S. C.**

I saw the evening failing,
I saw the darkness falling,
The twilight fading
Upon the tower wall,
Upon the mountain.

Upon the oak I saw
The darkness thicken,
The blackness waken
Upon the wall.

I saw the dark night falling
Across the doorway,
Across the table;
Upon the hand
The twilight failing.

Then I remembered the bursting
Of the doors of morning,
The whirling of quail,
The confusion of squirrels,
The sudden dawning;

Remembered the broken
Stone of the tomb,
The stunned guards,
The bright footprints
In the garden.

This again I saw,
Seeing the daylight fade,
Watching the darkness fall.

A Later Prophet

● Samuel M. Sargent

The Word came to him: Write no prophecy.

The time is past.

The world has gone beyond amenity,

And time spins fast.

So now extol the Lord, and laud His ways

Unto the end.

But he thought: What can I say in His praise?

Can I extend

The mighty paeans that have come like thunder

Out of the ages?

That ring and echo with a growing wonder

From Hebrew sages?

What could I add to David? Haggai?

To John or Paul?

To Daniel? Jeremiah? Malachi?

They said it all;

They and the others. Who can add to Christ?

What words are there?

And then a voice came: So much has sufficed

For your first prayer.

The Critic

● Robert A. Wiggins

A SINGLE hooded lamp burned in the room. It sat on a table where a young man was writing, and poured its incandescence downward on a cluttered array of papers, pencils, ashtray and cigarettes. The light spilled over the edge of the table to illuminate a small case of books nearby. Most of the volumes shrank in tattered modesty back into the shadowy depths of the shelves, but here and there a bold jacket stood forth to reflect the light. The yellow rays weakened as they reached the corners of the room; and a bulging sofa and overstuffed chair huddled against the walls away from the light.

The man leaned forward, his head resting on his left hand, elbow propped on the table, and continued scrawling a pencil across the sheet of paper before him. From time to time he looked up from the page to the blank wall as though it were several yards away and mirrored some action he was reporting. Occasionally he changed the routine to drop a pencil, light a cigarette, and, after blowing a roll of smoke across the table, plunge back into his writing.

A voice from the doorway to another room intruded on the silence. "Joe," it softly called, "it's very late. Don't you think you'd better come to bed?" A dark-haired young

woman moved into the room and sat down in the shadowy chair. She crossed her legs and smoothed her nightgown across her knees. She watched the figure sitting at the table. He apparently had not heard her entrance, for he continued struggling with the pencil on paper.

After a time the girl rose and swayed across the room to stand behind the man. She placed her hand on his shoulder and slowly moved it up to ruffle the hair at the back of his head. "Joe," she said again, "it's awfully late, and you've got to get up early to go to work."

Joe continued writing. After perhaps a minute had passed, he gathered the sheets of paper together, arranging them in order. He turned around to the girl. "Here, read this. Tell me what you think." He rose and gave the papers to her. She looked into his face as she took them; then she sank into his chair and began reading. Joe lit a cigarette and untied his already loosened tie. He replaced a book in the case and then paced back and forth across the room, puffing on his cigarette, and waited for the girl to finish reading.

She finally looked up from the sheet of paper. "It's very nice," she announced.

The man halted his pacing. "Nice?" he questioned. "I hadn't thought of it as nice. I want to

know how you feel when you finish. What are you thinking about? Has it done something to you? Has it made you start thinking about a lot of things you don't usually think about?"

As the man spoke, the girl gazed in wonder at his wild gestures, aware only that she had not pleased him. She looked back at the papers in her hands and slowly shuffled them. "That part where the fellow leaves," she said, "I don't think the girl would act that way. Not if she really loved him. When he tells her he has to go, if she really loved him she wouldn't let him go like that. Not if she really loved him."

"But that's not important," said the man. "That's just what happened. He had to go in order to find himself, and the girl understood. She knew it had to be that way. She never would have him be any other way. He couldn't stay on her terms, and she'd end by hating him if he did." He took the papers out of the girl's hands. "Listen to this," he said and began to read from one of the pages:

"Virginia turned to face him, smiling wistfully. 'If you really loved me you would stay. I think it dreadfully cruel of you to treat me so.' 'Love,' he answered, 'is not love if it makes demands of the beloved.' 'So now you are accusing me of being selfish.' 'I do not accuse,' he said; 'I'm only now beginning to see that we make contrary demands, and I don't think this very auspicious. I'll have

to go away for a while to work this out.' She was silent for a time; then she spoke softly: 'I do know that I would not have you change from what you are. I would not have you any other way. If you think it necessary to go now, I shall not object any more.'"

The girl covered her mouth with her hand and watched him read. His hand nervously fluttered away from clicking the corner of the pages with a fingernail to brush his brown hair in a backward motion. The tiny wrinkles by his mouth disappeared and reappeared with the movement of his lips. The vertical furrows between his eyebrows deepened as he squinted to read his own handwriting. When he finished she rose from the chair.

"Now you see the idea," he stated rather than asked. "You can't put it any plainer than that. You can't just say it to somebody. You've got to make them feel it. You see what I'm driving at?"

"Yes, dear," she answered. "It seems so simple when you explain it that way. I should have seen it before. I guess I'm not very sharp tonight, but I'm tired. It's late." She looked at him a moment and then went into the other room.

Joe crushed his cigarette out. He stared through the blank wall over the table and unconsciously toyed with the papers, evenly tapping their bottom edges on the table before finally letting them slip out of his hands to rest. He remained thoughtfully in this attitude for a time. At

last he picked up the page he had read aloud and stared at it. Suddenly, as though moved to action, he exhaled heavily in a sigh, carefully rearranged the pages, and placed them in a folder. From the bookcase he thoughtfully selected several volumes and piled them on the table, and then he stood silently looking about the room until the girl

reappeared in the doorway. She said, "I still think if I was that girl I wouldn't do what she did."

Joe looked toward her but did not speak.

She continued: "It's late, dear. You'd better come to bed."

Joe slowly fumbled for the switch on the lamp. "Yes, it's late," he echoed in a low voice.

Priest-Poet

A poem for Raymond Roseliep

© Joseph Joel Keith

His way is sandaled.
Field and hill
are where he journeys.
Halfway, still,

he nods and pauses
by a vine
climbing a dead tree:
His virgin shrine!

High in the silence,
losing light,
he sees more clearly
by bluest night.

Though form goes slowly
down in cool air,
spirit goes warmly
up heaven's stair.

The Other Side of the Coin

● George Garrett

DURING the war I performed a single and unrecorded act of heroism. It was on a mild evening at our airfield on Cape Bonn, and the occasion was the fire that burned up our supply tent. I stood in the quiet crowd watching, and I felt a kind of relaxed nostalgia, thinking about all those boots, socks, typewriters, messkits, printed forms, what-have-you, which were being transformed into a warm rosy glow. Then somehow I found out there was whiskey in that tent, and the whole complexion of the scene changed. It appears that, drawing on unknown reserves of strength, I fought off several M.P.'s, dashed into the flapping inferno, and rescued a case of Scotch. I am told that the crowd cheered when I was seen triumphantly emerging from the fire. A British major is said to have suggested that I be awarded the O.B.E. The fact is, I don't remember this incident clearly, and I was prepared afterward to plead temporary insanity. The thought of all that glorious whiskey being lost forever must have hit my mind with the impact of a tragic crisis. I don't remember anything about it or about the international party which followed this escapade. I do, however, even now have a clear and wincing recollection of the following morning when I awoke in a slit trench quite certain that the whole

base was undergoing a prolonged earthquake.

That's how far the war was, the real war, from us. It was always elsewhere, and the only guns I heard fired in earnest were those of the British antiaircraft outfit attached to us, popping away with ineffectual smoke puffs at single, high-flying Jerry reconnaissance planes. As far as I know, they never hit one. I ought to add modestly that I came near to sustaining wounds only once, and that was in the course of an argument with a native cab-driver in Tunis which resulted from the amazing liberties his meter took with the rate of exchange. A burly, red-haired Scotch captain who knew some Arabic rescued me in the nick of time.

At the time of the fire, the war was in Sicily and we were in North Africa sitting on a dusty, sun-glazed airfield. We were in the backwash of it. The war was across the Mediterranean, and every day our pilots went to it and came back to us (all the lucky ones), not to make it any nearer to us, but only to prove how far away it was from us. We were separate from the pilots. They were young and their laws, the secret, inner code which kept them functioning, were mysterious to us. Oh, we were all friendly enough, all right, but secretly we regarded them with envy and wonder. In our rou-

tine—the everyday, everlasting pattern of life on the base, which was, after all, designed solely to keep them in the air—they were as out of place as angels.

So it was difficult to handle a case like Austin. He would have been trouble anywhere, but in our situation the difficulty was doubled. And the whole thing was dumped unceremoniously into my lap. I was in the tent working on intelligence reports, trying, amid the inane clatter of my corporal's typewriter, to reduce the pilots' interrogation records to intelligible and innocent figures so that somewhere far back, even behind us, somebody who ought to know could tell at a glance what was going on. I was just contemplating the prospect of smashing the typewriter into many shiny pieces and retiring to my own tent with a bottle when the C.O. ducked his head into the tent. He had a long sad face like a springer spaniel.

"Cap'n Pierce," he said, "I want to have a little talk with you."

I knew it was going to be bad news. He never referred to my mediocre rank or even mentioned my surname unless things were very dark. Somehow I managed to catch the eye of my unregenerate corporal and convey the idea that we should rise, and we assumed a rough approximation of attention.

"As you were," he said and pulled a chair up to my table.

He still hadn't relaxed a single eyelash. He looked very West Point (which he was), or perhaps Sandhurst. We were all very British by that time.

"Cap'n Pierce, I am giving Austin to you. I wash my hands of it. I absolutely will not . . ."

"Excuse me, Colonel, but what do you mean, you're giving me Austin?"

"Stop pecking that damn typewriter," he roared at the corporal. "Go over to the mess tent and get a cup of coffee."

He turned on me.

"How the hell do you get any work done?"

The corporal gave me a brief pitiful look, not imploring so much as expressing his mock indignation at being spoken to so rudely and abruptly, and retreated from the tent.

"All right, Pierce," (he was shifting gears) "you've got a right to complain. I come here and order you to play mother superior to the biggest headache in the squadron. Sure, you've got a right to bitch. But that's all. You can complain all you damn well please and your voice will fall on deaf ears and a heart of Tennessee marble, because you've got him now and he's off my mind and I intend never to have another thought regarding Lieutenant Austin as long as I live."

"Colonel, would you mind . . ."

"You mean you don't know about Lieutenant Austin?" He looked at me with a convincing pose of disbelief.

"That is exactly the case."

I could see that an outburst of some sort was in the offing, and I steadied myself for whatever it was going to be.

"As far as I am concerned," I

said, "Lieutenant Austin is only the name of a flier who joined our outfit a month or so ago and has since flown something like—" (I rummaged aimlessly through the stacks of papers. Official papers have a kind of sedative effect in wartime by impressing one with the irreducible sense of one's total unimportance in the overall scheme. In a way it's like thinking about astronomical time. You feel smaller and less urgent. I hoped it would have this effect on the Colonel.)

"Twelve," he said. "He's flown twelve missions for us and there's nothing wrong there. He's O.K. as long as he's in the airplane. It's when he's down here with us that the trouble starts."

"Sorry, Colonel; if he's got problems, they're a mystery to me. I'm afraid I'll have to admit to complete ignorance."

He stamped his feet on the ground, stood up, grabbed the small of his back, and let go with the climactic outburst. It turned out to be laughter, wild, resonant, and, I thought at the time, maniacal laughter.

"Well, I declare you will. Yes sir, before long I stand here to tell you you'll know that man well."

And, as his laughter dwindled into a mild fit of coughing, he stepped out of the tent into the brilliant African sunlight. I saw him turn in the hazy brightness and wave a kind of benediction as he disappeared.

A couple of days later I met Lieutenant Austin. It seems that he had been hitchhiking to town the

night before. A couple of G.I.'s with a truck picked him up. Somebody had a bottle, and they all got nicely plastered. Whereupon Lieutenant Austin suggested that they drive a few miles out of their way to a place he knew of where there was plenty of good, cheap wine. They settled down for the evening, and then it appeared that in the early-morning confusion Austin sneaked out and drove off in the truck, drove it at incredible speed for a few miles until, missing a turn, he put it into a ditch. The truck was ruined beyond repair, and Austin wasn't even scratched.

I got the story from a downcast lieutenant of the Engineers. It was his truck. I told him we'd see what we could do about the truck, that it would be a shame if, under these emergency conditions, we had to lose a valuable pilot and he had to lose a couple of drivers just because of an accident. I talked about replacement difficulties, the dangers of combat flying, and how a little thing like this could be worked out with a minimum of strain and pain for all concerned if we were level-headed, etc. After I got him feeling a little happier about the war, I sent for Lieutenant Austin.

I wasn't really prepared for *him*. I had planned what to do with the wayward flier. He was probably working off a case of nerves, I thought, so I'd just put him in his place with a stern military lecture and a few undirected threats. I guessed he'd be tough and I planned to beat him to the punch. I decided to keep him waiting to see me until

he got good and worried. I told my corporal that I'd be over at the Signal Tent and that when the culprit arrived he was to tell him that I was busy and to invite him to sit down, while the corporal walked a half a mile to get me. The corporal was amused.

"Captain," he said, examining me with condescending skepticism, "why the Hollywood production?"

"Never mind," I said. "You just do what I told you."

"I personally don't think this kind of deception is effective."

I ignored him. When he came to get me at the Signal Tent, I told him to take a walk along the flight line, and to take his time. I didn't want him to witness the denouement.

When I entered my tent, a short, plumpish, sandy-haired boy who looked a few days past sixteen stood up and smiled. He looked as harmless as a rag doll.

"Did you want to see me, Cap'n Pierce?"

I was trying to regroup my astonished forces to make a stand. I did my best to look Sandhurst.

"You *are* Lieutenant Austin, I presume."

What followed was silence. At a loss, I decided to shuffle papers, so I sat down at my desk. He sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Did anyone tell you that you could sit down?"

"No sir, you're the only one here, and you didn't."

"Did I tell you that you might smoke?"

"No sir, I just lit one up on my

own. Would you like one, sir?"

He smiled nicely and offered the pack to me.

"Never mind," I said, "just never mind."

He was the most exasperatingly polite anarchist I have ever met.

"What did you want to see me about, Cap'n?"

"Guess."

"Something about my operations report?"

"Listen, Austin, you know damn well why you're here. Now what I want to hear is how you happened to wreck a truck last night. It better be good because you're in trouble."

"Oh," he said, "the truck."

I was treated to an outlandishly improbable narrative. He had gone for a walk because he liked walking in the evenings and he liked to look at the stars. Two very nice soldiers had stopped their truck and offered him a ride and, though he wasn't planning to go anywhere, he decided he wouldn't hurt their feelings, so he went. He had this bottle, you see, which he was saving for his twenty-first birthday next month, but since they'd been so hospitable he thought he'd open it up then and there. These boys hadn't had any fun for a long time; so he decided to treat them to a nightcap at a little place he'd heard of. So, they went. While the G.I.'s were in the men's room, he got to thinking about the possibilities of a vehicle becoming airborne; I mean *seriously*. He'd read somewhere that a racing driver had become airborne at a certain speed, and he just wondered. There was a marvelous piece of straight

road, and he thought he'd just borrow the truck for five minutes and run a little experiment. The trouble was that in the dark his depth perception got confused and a curve came up sooner than he had expected. He was certainly sorry if he had caused everybody a lot of trouble. He apologized.

I was awestruck. Any officer who heard a story like that would have thrown the book at him. But somehow he seemed just innocent enough, just blissfully ignorant enough, to be telling the truth. Not that the truth made any difference. The point was, clearly, that we couldn't afford to lose a pilot just because of some escapade. I summoned up my resources and tried in a quiet way to indicate the gravity of his offense and to make it plain that if anything even remotely like it happened again, something very *bad* would happen to him. He nodded pleasantly and promised to stay out of trouble.

"Just one thing more, Lieutenant," I said as he stood up to go, "how did you get out of that wreck without a scratch?"

"Well, sir, when I saw the truck was going for the ditch, I just closed my eyes and bailed out."

The Colonel made a point of sitting by me at the noon mess. He was unusually conversational. I waited for what was coming.

"By the way, Larry," he said, "what did you decide to do about Austin?"

"I thought you had clean hands and a heart of stone."

"I'm just mildly curious."

"Well," I said, "we can't very well afford to throw the book at him right now, can we?"

"No."

"And he wouldn't be much help to anybody if we transferred him to the infantry."

"No, I'm afraid he wouldn't be at home in an infantry platoon."

"All right, Joe," I said. "I'll tell you what I think. I think he's a singularly innocent and misunderstood young man, in short, a baby—and just as irresponsible."

"I can show you an impressive list of misdemeanors, starting state-side and continuing right up to last night's little adventure."

"Maybe, but I think after last night's show and," I added pompously, "our talk this morning, he's going to improve."

"Bet me?"

Then he got very stern.

"That kid will never learn. He doesn't belong in this outfit. Either he's too dumb, and I'll grant you that possibility, or else he's just too damn slick for his own good."

"I know the Army, Larry," he said. "And I know what one man like this can do to a good outfit. Before long we'll have the whole squadron, and I mean the fliers, in the psycho ward. Those guys are made up of nothing but a switchboard of trained reflexes, and when they pop, they go out like skyrocket. I don't want to see *my* outfit go to pieces just because one guy, one little rosy-cheeked, snotty pilot has a lot of loose ball bearings where he ought to have brains."

"He's dumb," I said. "He's just as dumb as the day God made him."

"Huh!" the Colonel snorted. "Well, in any case, I consider him a corrupting influence."

"Why don't you turn him over to the Chaplain, then? He's the soul-redeemer."

Then he started to relax. He was bound to after all that.

"What are you going to do about getting a truck for those engineers before we all go to jail?"

"Got any ideas?" I asked.

"That's your problem."

In wartime things like that can be done, and with the help of my corporal, only too glad to participate in an unofficial adventure, I got the truck for the engineers. But I was wrong about Austin, or at least partly wrong. He kept flying for us and he was a good flier. He even managed to get a couple of Jerries over Sicily, but on the ground he stayed in trouble. There was a weekend in Tunis and some sort of brawl involving a French colonel and a few naval officers. Luckily, one of our fliers got him away from the scene of the crime before the real trouble, the international situation, had a chance to develop. And there were other things. He shot some goats with his forty-five while he was out for a jeep ride. We paid the Arabs three times what they were worth, and we were very stern with him; but it was beginning to appear hopeless. I called in another flier, who turned out to be as baffled as the rest of us.

"It must be whiskey, Cap'n," he said. "He seems to be okay when he's sober, but he just can't handle alcohol. He's just like an Indian."

I continued to see Austin, and every time he appeared, smiling, as happy and naive as if the world had been made that minute, I was convinced that he was only the victim of a remarkable series of accidents. In a way I began to like him, to sympathize with him because it seemed to me that we were all living strangely in what was not much more than a series of disconnected adventures. On the other hand, to be truthful, I envied him too, because I thought he had possession of something which the rest of us had lost somewhere. I'm not sure what it was, unless (to make a guess) it was a kind of innate ability to see himself and the wide world without taking either very seriously.

Things might have gone along this way indefinitely if something hadn't happened which changed the picture. What happened was that Austin's incomprehensible antics began to take a larger share of his activity. He started to cut up while he was flying. At first it was the usual thing, the little buzzing runs over the field to scatter the ground crews when he returned from a mission, or going out of his way to scare Arabs and rear-echelon drivers. I thought it was because the war was finally beginning to touch his nerves, and I thought it might also be the influence of the other fliers. For a while I managed to argue the Colonel into that point of view.

Then the fliers themselves started to complain, and they went to the Colonel about it.

"All right, Cap'n Pierce," he said, "I've had enough of that man. Now we're going to get him out, and quick."

"How?"

"I won't just transfer him from the outfit. That would be the easy way, but it wouldn't satisfy me."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was worried about that word *satisfy*.

"Your baby has caused too much trouble for too long. It's beginning to get on my nerves. It won't make me happy any more to let him walk out of here the way he came in my office that first time—smiling."

"So, I'll tell you the truth, Larry," he said evenly, "I'm laying for him. The next time he pulls an eight-ball trick—and he's bound to—I'll break him in little pieces. I'll send him back to the States in handcuffs if I get a chance."

"You're beginning to sound a little pathological, Joe," I said as nicely as I could.

"Don't forget, Pierce, you're in this thing yourself. He's your baby."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

He relaxed for a moment and almost smiled. I was tense, expecting anything. We were all nervous and unpredictable in those days.

"Larry, don't say a thing like that. We're friends. I just want you to know how I feel about it."

"As long as you're being honest, I'll tell you what I feel. I agree with you. Something has to be done, maybe a transfer. Maybe he

gets a rest. Maybe the boy's crazy, I don't know. I'm almost forty now, and I've forgotten what the world looked like at twenty. I *do* know it would have seemed like a damned crazy world if I had to do the things these kids are doing."

"When you get out of the service, you ought to run for Congress," he said. "You've got the mouth for it."

"Look, I know how you feel and I know we can't keep him much longer. But don't let me hear you talking about *laying* for him. . ."

"That's what I'm doing," he said. "I'm laying for him, laying a big trap for him. And I just want you to go on as you have been, encourage the s.o.b., lead him into it."

I stood up to go.

"Joe, it's going to be a long war. Try and keep your head. Don't let a little thing like this ruin you."

"Don't you understand?"

He looked pleading, as if he were about to cry.

"He is ruining me. He's ruining my outfit. I can't quit thinking about that insolent—call it what you want to—I'll call it lack of concern. The whole world is going to pieces, and *he's* not interested. It doesn't even bother him."

"You ought to take a rest," I said.

"Get out of here!" he shouted. "Get the hell out of here."

I walked back to the tent feeling pretty bad. We had been good friends for a long time, since the States, and that seemed like years ago. I sat down and tried to do something with the intelligence reports. It must have showed.

"Got some troubles, Cap'n?" the

corporal said, looking over the top of his typewriter.

I thought of Austin, far off, lonely in the beautiful Sicilian sky, hunched in the cockpit of his almost obsolete P-40, a small incredible human being who looked like a doll. He would be studying the sky around him and the deft line of the horizon. He would have just enough gas to get him back from his mission. He was over there where the war was.

I decided it was only fair to let Austin in on what was about to happen to him. When he got back, I called him into my own tent. He had just come off the flight line, and I thought it would be good to face him right away, even before he was interrogated. I may have been wrong, but I thought if I forced it on him right then, while he was still half in the air, awkward and unsteady on the ground, that maybe I could reach him. He walked in and sat down casually.

"Got a smoke?" he asked.

I gave him a cigarette and studied him. He was cool and smiling and almost neat looking. He was neither flushed with an overwhelming burden of excitement nor worn out, exasperated, sleep-walking.

"How was it?"

"What?"

"How was Sicily?"

"Lovely," he said. "I'm going back for a vacation after the war."

"Flak?"

"Cap'n, I save all that for the interrogation."

I kept looking at him, trying to get at the truth. His remark was a

perfectly innocent rejoinder to my tactless groping, but it was, nonetheless, satirical. I decided there was something very cold inside him, a cold, hard unbreakable core that I hadn't noticed before, which maybe, hadn't been there before.

"What happened to you, Austin?"

"Nothing ever happens to me."

So I gave it to him straight. I told him he was running out of gas. He must be very careful; he had enemies. He just nodded. He didn't ask me, as I almost hoped he would, to be more specific. He didn't even seem to be grateful. When I got through, he started out of the tent onto the darkening field.

"Wait a minute," I called. "Good luck, Lieutenant."

"Same to you," he said.

Three days later we had the goods on him. There had been an accident on the road and a fight. Austin crashed his jeep into another one, and two enlisted men were hurt. Somehow, as usual, he managed to escape injury. The accident was followed by a fight with some M.P.'s, and he got away. We didn't even find out about it until afternoon the next day, and by that time he was away on a mission. The Colonel showed no signs of jubilation. He simply ordered me to meet Austin when he came in from the flight and let him know that he was now about to atone for all his sins.

"You can take the chaplain with you if you want to," he said dryly.

It was a hard thing to have to do. I didn't want to see him. I couldn't

be sure just how much I was responsible for what had happened, and I wanted the thing to just take care of itself. Still, there was the other side of the coin. I felt somehow the *rightness* of the whole thing, that I ought to be the one to deal the blow. I was baffled but not displeased at my own sense of relief that it was all going to be over.

I went down to the flight line to meet him. It was a hot dusk, and the last red sun glinted on the planes as they came in one by one and taxied down the runway, the wheels throwing up little plumes of dust, to their appointed places. I could see the pilots struggling out of their narrow cockpits and then coming along the runway silently.

"I guess you're looking for Austin, Cap'n."

I looked at a very tired lieutenant who was walking slowly toward me.

"Yes."

"Well, he got his today."

"Dead?"

"On the way back he broke formation and started stooging around. I said, 'What the hell are you doing?' and he said, 'What's it to you? I'm going back and look at a Sicilian sunset.' After that, he must have switched off his set. I couldn't get to him. We circled back and we saw some Jerry 109's come in on him all of a sudden. We saw it,

but we couldn't do anything about it. We were low on gas, and I had the whole flight to bring home."

"Did Austin bail out?"

"No sir," he said. "He never had a chance."

"Why didn't you radio back?"

"I wanted to see you first."

By the time I got back to the tent, it was already dark. The first stars were out, and everybody on the field, I guess, knew what had happened. I didn't bother to report to the Colonel. It was *his* problem now. But that wasn't true either. I wanted it to be his problem, but I think it belonged to both of us. When I came in, the corporal was filing some of the papers that had been lying around on my desk for a long time.

"I decided to shape things up, Cap'n."

"All right."

I went over and looked at a map we had tacked up on a bulletin board. It was a big map of the theater. The Mediterranean was different shades of blue, very blue and clean in contrast to the sand color of North Africa. I kept looking at the map. I knew that the corporal was going to say something if I gave him a chance, and I didn't want to listen to him, or anybody, for a while.



Nocturne

● Stephen Morris

Light from this sky
Splinters to die.
None can know why.
Lid the eye.
Choke the cry.

Wine from this press
Is powerless
To dam or bless
Such duress
Of sadness.

Flesh of this weave,
Knit for the reeve,
Ravels at eve.
Warps fail cleave,
Old wives grieve.

Fume of this grain
From popped plain,
Sickens the brain,
As lights strain
Through the rain.

Rays from this pearl
Never will twirl
Star, or whirl
Cones as curl
From one girl.

Tune from this shell
At passing bell
Shivered and fell:
A love knell,
Ill or well.

Contributors

FOUR QUARTERS is pleased to welcome to its pages the following new contributors: HORTENSE CUPO of Staten Island, New York; SAMUEL M. SARGENT of Vista, Missouri; ROBERT A. WIGGINS, a member of the Department of English at the University of California; and GEORGE GARRETT of Princeton, New Jersey. HOWARD A. WILEY and STEPHEN MORRIS, both Philadelphia newspapermen, have been represented in **FOUR QUARTERS** on several occasions, as has MARION SCHOEBERLEIN, whose poetry has also appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *Poetry Magazine*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. HATTON BURKE, a former member of the La Salle College faculty and last year's chairman of **FOUR QUARTERS'** editorial board, is now chairman of the English Department at Pensacola Junior College. BROTHER D. ADELBERT, a member of the La Salle College English Department, has had two of his poems included in the recently published *Beginnings: Prose and Verse*, an anthology of new Catholic writers. JOSEPH JOEL KEITH, whose tribute to Father Roseliep, a former contributor to **FOUR QUARTERS**, appears in this issue, has written for many journals, including *Harper's Magazine*, *Saturday Review*, *America*, and *Spirit*. Once again **FOUR QUARTERS** is indebted to CARL MERSCHER for the block print on the inside front cover.

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